Article 21: From Surveillance to Support: Enabling Hope in Probation (ACJ20-A021)

FROM SURVEILLANCE TO SUPPORT: ENABLING HOPE IN PROBATION

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Abstract

This article explores the role of hope in probation practice, drawing on a qualitative study of hope in probation, we reflect on key considerations for modern correctional policy. We start by arguing that whilst hope can be understood as a psychological construct it can also take moral and political forms that can shape correctional legitimacy for both practitioners and people on probation. If probation services want to truly be institutions of hope then we suggest that it is these more social forms of hope which they should focus on.

Keywords: probation, hope, correctional policy, legitimacy

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of hope has gained traction in criminological and correctional discourse, although it remains an underexplored dimension of effective probation practice (Phillips et al., 2025). Crucially, hope does appear to be associated with individual-level change towards desistance (Farrall et al., 2014), suggesting that finding ways of increasing hope may yield benefits. Within probation, hope is primarily recognised as a psychological resource to be nurtured although a number of theoretical perspectives conceptualise it socially. In these latter conceptualisations, different forms of hope shape the way individuals engage with supervision, envision their futures, and navigate the constraints of the criminal justice system. In this article we reflect on the role of hope in probation, drawing on a qualitative study of hope in the probation context. We examine how hope is conceptualised, constrained, and cultivated in everyday correctional practice and, in doing so, contribute to a broader conversation about the values and principles that should underpin modern correctional policy.

Probation occupies a unique space in the correctional landscape. It is often positioned as a more humane alternative to incarceration, although its practice is frequently shaped by managerialism, risk aversion, and bureaucratic imperatives that have led to increasingly pervasive forms of punishment in the community in recent years (McNeill, 2018). These tensions have led to a form of supervision that prioritises technical compliance over substantive engagement (Phillips et al., 2025; Robinson & McNeill, 2008), often at the expense of the relational and transformative work that practitioners aspire to deliver, and which cohere with their own professional value base (Grant, 2016). When analysed through the lens of hope, supervision in its current form is shown to be about surveillance and control, rather than support and empowerment. In this article we show that when practitioners are able to work relationally, creatively, and with discretion, hope can be nurtured.

Through interviews, focus groups, and co-produced methodologies, our study explored how hope is experienced, expressed, and enacted within probation. Participants spoke of institutional hopes - such as completing a sentence or avoiding recall - but also of deeper, transformational hopes tied to identity, relationships, and future aspirations (Seeds, 2022). Crucially, they also articulated radical and collective forms of hope: the ability to imagine futures beyond the criminal justice system, and the importance of solidarity and community in sustaining belief in change.

Theoretically, the article draws on a range of frameworks to illuminate these findings. Snyder et al.'s (2002) cognitive theory of hope offers a psychological lens, while Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy, Lear's (2008) radical hope, and Seeds' (2022) deep hope provide more expansive, political and ethical perspectives. These frameworks challenge dominant narratives of responsibilisation, which place the burden of change on individuals while ignoring the structural conditions that constrain their lives (Albertson et al., 2022).

The remainder of this article focuses on a study of hope in probation that was carried out in England and Wales. The Probation Service in England and Wales is responsible for supervising all people who are subject to probation, primarily serving three types of sentence. Firstly, Community Orders are periods of supervision in the community imposed for offences which do not pass the 'custody threshold'. Community Orders require people on probation to undertake a number of proscriptive and prescriptive activities (such as complying with curfews, doing community service or attending

rehabilitative programmes). The Probation Service also supervises people who are sentenced to a Suspended Sentence Order – this is, legally, a custodial sanction but one which is suspended for up to two years. SSOs come with a number of conditions and requirements, similar to Community Orders, but with the added threat that non-compliance can result in the original custodial sentence being activated. Finally, the Service supervises people upon release from prison. Again, people are subject to a number of conditions and non-compliance is dealt with via recalls to prison. In total, the Service supervises around 250,000 people at a given time; around three times the number of people in prison in England and Wales.

Conceptual Frameworks: Reframing Hope in Correctional Practice

To understand the role of hope in probation, it is essential to move beyond narrow psychological definitions and engage with broader conceptualisations that treat hope as a relational, ethical, and political force. Dominant models in correctional psychology, such as Snyder et al's (2002) cognitive theory of hope, frame it as a goal-oriented mental process. According to Snyder et al., hope involves two key components: agency (the motivation to pursue goals) and pathways (the perceived ability to identify routes to those goals). This framework has been influential in rehabilitative interventions which emphasise personal rehabilitation – i.e., ones that encourage individuals to set goals, build self-efficacy, and envision positive futures – over more social and moral forms of rehabilitation.

While Snyder's model offers valuable insights, it risks reducing hope to an individual trait or a measurable asset that can be cultivated through cognitive restructuring. In the context of probation, this can lead to responsibilising narratives where individuals are expected to 'think their way' out of structurally embedded disadvantage thus overlooking the social, emotional, and institutional conditions that shape people's capacity to hope. When hope is treated as a psychological resource, it can become another burden placed on those under supervision by being a proxy for a sign of compliance, a performance of progress, or a tool for risk management.

To counter this, we draw on Freire's concept of critical hope, which emerges from his work on pedagogy and social justice. For Freire, hope is a political stance rooted in the recognition of oppression and the belief that transformation is both necessary and possible. Critical hope allows practitioners and service users to name systemic injustices while still adhering to an ethics of care within the system (Dominey & Canton, 2022). Critical hope is the hope of the teacher who refuses to give up on students, or the probation officer who bends bureaucratic rules to meet human needs.

Complementing Freire's work is Lear's notion of radical hope, developed in response to cultural devastation. Lear describes radical hope as the capacity to orient oneself toward a future that cannot yet be fully imagined; a form of hope that persists even when existing frameworks of meaning have collapsed. In probation, radical hope surfaces when individuals envision lives beyond the criminal justice system, despite repeated setbacks, entrenched processes of marginalisation and systemic barriers.

Finally, we incorporate insights from criminological scholarship on collective hope (Braithwaite, 2004), which emphasises the social nature of hope. Collective hope is nurtured in peer support networks and forms of practice that resist isolation and individualisation. In probation, collective hope challenges the dominant logic of responsibilisation by foregrounding interdependence and co-

production.

Taken together, these frameworks offer a more expansive understanding of hope in correctional practice. They shift the focus from individual psychology to social context and from risk management to more relational ways of working. In doing so, they provide a foundation for reimagining probation as a site of ethical engagement and human flourishing.

Methods

The empirical foundation of this article is drawn from a qualitative study involving interviews with current and former probation practitioners, current and former service users as well as policy actors, and allied professionals. The study employed interviews, focus groups, and co-produced methodologies to explore how hope is generated, constrained, and enacted within probation contexts. In total, we conducted 47 interviews and one focus group with people connected to probation in England. Participants included people currently or formerly under probation supervision, current and former probation practitioners, and individuals working alongside probation (i.e., charities, advocacy groups, and faith-based support services). The findings reveal a complex landscape in which hope is present but not necessarily in the most ideal way. Participants felt that probation *should* be focused on supporting people to have and achieve hopes but there was also a consensus that in its current form in England and Wales, a set of organisational factors inhibit the development of what Seeds (2022) terms 'deep hopes'.

Findings

Participants described a range of hopes, which can be broadly categorised into three types: institutional, transformational, and radical/collective. Institutional hope was the most commonly expressed and often centred on sentence completion, avoiding breach or recall, and "getting through" to the end of an Order and period of license. These hopes were typically shaped by the procedural and risk-focused nature of supervision. For many, the goal was simply to comply with conditions and exit the system with minimal disruption. While understandable, this form of hope is limited in scope and seems to reflect a desire for survival over transformation.

In contrast, transformational (deep) hope involved aspirations for personal change, rebuilding relationships, securing employment, or becoming a better parent. These hopes were more future-oriented and emotionally resonant, often tied to identity reconstruction and desistance. Participants spoke of wanting "a normal life," "to be seen as more than an offender," or "to be a role model for my kids." These hopes came across as fragile and contingent especially for those still under supervision and they were talked about as being dependent on access to support, trust in practitioners, and the ability to navigate systemic barriers. There was also a sense that probation should be able to play a role in these types of hopes by supporting people to 'travers[e] an unmapped terrain towards a future that is not known' (Seeds, 2022: 241). Importantly, transformational hope was often undermined by the rigidity of probation processes, high caseloads, and a lack of meaningful engagement. Some participants described how they started probation with a belief that probation would help them achieve these deeper hopes, but that these were quickly 'drowned' out by a tick box culture. Similarly, probation practitioners – especially those who had chosen to leave the service – expressed views that the managerial culture which they saw as endemic in the Service made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to work with people on probation around achieving deep hopes.

Whilst our initial analysis - presented in Phillips et al. (2025) - painted a generally negative picture of probation, we were conscious that there were still positive stories in our data. Participants did have examples of how probation could facilitate peoples' deeper hopes and practitioners were able to say how they still found hope in their work.

Thus, beyond these individualised hopes, our analysis uncovered expressions of the more social forms of hope mentioned above. Radical hope, as theorised by Lear, emerged in moments where participants imagined futures beyond the criminal justice system. Examples here related to people talking about futures that were not yet fully formed. This form of hope was evident in stories of persistence despite repeated setbacks, and in the refusal to be defined by past convictions or institutional labels. Collective hope, meanwhile, was rooted in relationships with peers, mentors, community groups, and occasionally with probation staff. This kind of hope was nurtured through acts of solidarity and shared recognition of the challenges that people on probation face in trying to move on from harmful lifestyles. Participants described how hope was sustained "shoulder to shoulder," through informal networks and relational practices that resisted isolation and responsibilisation.

Practitioners also reflected on their own experiences of hope, often in relation to the constraints of their roles. Many spoke of the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) involved in maintaining belief in change amidst bureaucratic pressures and risk-focused cultures (Phillips, 2011). Some described small acts of resistance - bending rules, prioritising relationships over paperwork, or celebrating incremental progress - as expressions of critical hope. Participants also talked about how naming systemic barriers helped them to still find hope in their work. These moments were often described as the most meaningful aspects of their work, even if they were not formally recognised or rewarded.

Taken together, these insights challenge dominant narratives of probation as a purely technical or risk-management enterprise. They reveal hope as a dynamic and contested practice that is shaped by institutional logics but also enacted through relationships and acts of resistance. In doing so, they underscore the need to reframe probation as a space where hope can be cultivated, not just monitored. Crucially, however, this type of practice was seen as being undervalued by the Service which prioritized quantitative measures of success and risk management approaches. This is not to say that probation practitioners and providers should not be concerned with risk – that is central to what probation is trying to achieve and important in terms of allocating resources. However, our participants felt that, as currently constituted, the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of risk and away from relational work.

Barriers to Hope

Despite the potential of hope to transform correctional practice, our analysis reveals a range of systemic and cultural barriers that inhibit its cultivation within probation. These barriers are embedded in the organisational structures, policy frameworks, and professional cultures that shape everyday supervision. Thus, reform will not be easy but we would argue that understanding these obstacles is essential for reimagining probation as a space where hope can be meaningfully enacted.

One of the most pervasive barriers is managerialism, which has reshaped probation into a performance-driven service focused on risk management and compliance. The most common theme across our interviews was participants describing a "tick-box culture" in which practitioners are

incentivised to meet targets rather than build relationships. This emphasis on technical compliance - attending appointments, completing assessments, avoiding breach - often comes at the expense of substantive engagement. As one practitioner noted, "It's not about what's meaningful, it's about what's measurable." It seemed to us that this shift has narrowed the scope of probation work, reducing opportunities for relational practice.

Closely linked to managerialism is the dominance of risk aversion in probation policy and practice. The prioritisation of public protection has led to increasingly rigid supervision regimes, where discretion is curtailed and practitioners are discouraged from taking relational or rehabilitative risks. Several participants spoke of a culture of fear. For practitioners, this was a fear of making mistakes, or of being blamed for serious further offences, whilst for people under supervision, there was a fear of being breached or recalled. This climate, we would argue, stifles innovation and undermines the trust and flexibility required to support hopeful change. For service users, this risk-focused approach translated into a perception that probation is all about surveillance and control, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Another significant barrier is resource scarcity, particularly in the wake of austerity and the erosion of community services. Practitioners described how the disappearance of local support networks such as housing, mental health, addiction services had left them with inadequate tools to respond to complex needs. As one participant put it, "All I can offer is contact - human contact - and even that's rationed." Without access to meaningful interventions, probation risks becoming a hollow institution, unable to support the structural conditions necessary for hope. For service users, this scarcity reinforces the sense that change is difficult and unsupported.

The emotional toll of probation work also emerged as a barrier to hopeful practice. Practitioners spoke of burnout, disillusionment, and the struggle to maintain belief in change amidst bureaucratic constraints. Some described coping strategies that involved distancing themselves from service users or avoiding deep engagement. Whilst these strategies are understandable, they risk further eroding the relational foundations of what we understand as good quality probation practice (Robinson et al., 2014). Meanwhile, service users described feeling dehumanised by the system, treated as risk categories rather than people with potential (Hannah-Moffat, 2005). This mutual disaffection seemed to create a cycle in which hope was being 'drowned out'.

Finally, institutional distrust was a recurring theme. Many service users expressed scepticism about probation's intentions, viewing it as punitive rather than supportive. This distrust was often rooted in past experiences of being let down, misrecognised, or sanctioned for what were perceived to be minor instances of non-compliance. In such contexts, expressing hope or imagining a better future felt risky. As one participant reflected, "Why would I share my hopes with someone who might use them against me?"

Together, these barriers illustrate the structural and cultural conditions that constrain hopeful practice in probation. They highlight the need for reform that goes beyond individual interventions and addresses the systemic logics that shape correctional work.

Enabling Hope

While probation systems often constrain hope through managerialism and risk aversion, our data also reveal pathways for cultivating hope. Enabling hope in correctional practice requires more than individual optimism which, in the words of Vaclav Havel is 'merely the conviction that something will turn out well'. Rather, our analysis suggests that it demands structural and cultural shifts that allow practitioners and service users to imagine and pursue better futures together. This section outlines the conditions and practices that support hopeful engagement in probation.

Central to enabling hope is a commitment to person-centred practice. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of being treated as individuals rather than risk categories. When practitioners took time to understand people's lives, aspirations, and challenges, service users reported feeling seen, heard, and valued. These interactions fostered trust and opened space for future-oriented thinking. One participant described how a probation officer asked what they wanted from supervision and helped them pursue a meaningful activity – importantly, this transformed their view of probation from punitive to supportive and this garnered a more hopeful outlook as well as more legitimacy in the eyes of the probationer. These small relational gestures were often described in terms that implied they were more meaningful than formal interventions.

We also identified discretion as a key enabler of hope. Practitioners who exercised professional judgement such as bending rules, prioritising relationships, or resisting bureaucratic pressures said they were more able to support service users in ways that standardised procedures could not. These acts of ethical refusal, while risky in managerial cultures, were described as expressions of critical hope: a refusal to accept the system's limitations as inevitable. Discretion allowed practitioners to respond to complexity, honour individual narratives, and support incremental progress. It also enabled them to challenge deficit-based framings and recognise the strengths and potential of those under supervision.

Co-production was also identified as a hopeful practice. When service users were involved in shaping their supervision plans, contributing to programme design, or advising on policy, they reported feeling empowered and respected. Co-production reframes probation as a collaborative endeavour rather than a top-down imposition. This form of practice aligns with collective hope by fostering shared ownership of change and recognising the expertise of lived experience. Participants argued that probation should routinely involve service users in decision-making, not only to improve outcomes but to restore dignity and legitimacy.

Beyond individual relationships, community-based models were seen as vital to enabling hope. Participants spoke positively about probation delivered through hubs, peer-led initiatives, and partnerships with local organisations. These settings offered holistic support, reduced isolation, and created opportunities for connection. They also allowed probation to be embedded in the communities it serves, rather than operating as a distant bureaucratic arm. Community engagement was described as generative in that it produces hope through shared imagination and collective action.

Finally, strengths-based approaches were repeatedly cited as essential. Rather than focusing solely on risk and deficits, practitioners who recognised and built on people's capacities were more likely to foster hope. This included celebrating small wins, encouraging creativity, and supporting personal

goals. Strengths-based practice aligns with the Good Lives Model (Ward et al., 2007) and other desistance-oriented frameworks, but participants stressed that it must be embedded in everyday interactions, not reserved for specialist programmes.

To sum up, enabling hope in probation requires a shift from surveillance to support. Whilst this has much in common with what McNeill (2006) has termed a desistance paradigm for probation practice, what we suggest here is more collaborative, is underpinned by principles of solidarity and has a keener eye on structural barriers to change than other models of practice have tended to have. Put simply, when viewed through the lens of hope, probation should not (just) be a mechanism of control, but a space where people can reconnect with possibility, purpose, and community.

Conclusion

This article has argued that hope should not be a peripheral concern in correctional practice but a central concept that shapes how probation is experienced, delivered, and understood. Drawing on empirical data and a range of conceptual frameworks, we have shown that hope in probation takes multiple forms such as institutional, transformational, radical, and collective. Each of these forms of hope reflect different orientations toward change and say something different about what probation is trying to achieve.

The empirical data make clear that hope is routinely constrained by the structural conditions of probation. Managerialism, risk aversion, resource scarcity, and cultures of fear and distrust all work to suppress hopeful practice. When probation is reduced to surveillance and technical compliance, it loses its capacity to support meaningful change.

To move forward, probation must be reimagined as a caring institution that enables human flourishing rather than simply managing risk. This means embedding hope structurally: through policy that prioritises rehabilitation, training that supports relational work, and investment in community-based resources that allow people to build lives beyond the system. In a correctional landscape often dominated by control, containment, and austerity, hope offers a counter-narrative that is rooted in ethics, possibility, and transformation. By taking hope seriously, probation can become more than just a mechanism of supervision and control.

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